Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education

Vol. VIII, Issue No. XVI, October-2014, ISSN 2230-7540

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AN INTERNATIONALLY INDEXED PEER REVIEWED & REFEREED JOURNAL

www.ignited.in

Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education
Vol. VIII, Issue No. XVI, October-2014, ISSN 2230-7540

Politics of Exile in Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie's Fiction

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Abstract – The poetics of exile has insuperable politics attached to it. The expatriate's act of articulation whether intended or not is political in nature. Dislocation, cultural and geographical, forces the expatriate to take a fresh measure of his being and belonging. The desire to find a sustainable stand in the socio-political structure of the adopted homes is met with a rigorous resistance from the established structures and their politically unacknowledged nevertheless clearly visible hierarchies of discrimination. These structures by denying easy acceptability or conversely through an easy accommodation into the existing slots force the expatriate upon him/herself. The situation induces a crisis whereby the expatriate has to look in and look out, look back and look at his/her existence vis-à-vis the predetermined constricting frames of identification to negotiate a sustainable sense of identity.

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INTRODUCATION

Looking back, and to search for one's roots is not a leisurely act of romancing with nostalgia but it reflects an essential stage in the politics of exile. It is a politically potent move, by reclaiming an overlooked past the expatriate stakes his claim to be considered beyond the constraints of existing frameworks. However, an exploration of the past ties, reassuring as it might seem at a personal level, has its significance in the sense of group solidarity, an anchorage that it offers to the expatriate in the both the spaces.

The borders between the private and the public domains are seriously problematized in the expatriate experience. The private becomes the public, through a triangular politicization – from the mainstream, the immigrant community and the community back in the country of origin. In a way the position of the expatriate is doubly compromised. An effort to reclaim roots or search a belonging in origins runs the risk of stereotypical labeling 'ethnic' and if the expatriate consciously tries to evade 'ethnicity' he/she may become a pariah within his own community for sacrificing his experience of otherness and not voicing the migrant cause. Quite ironically, from another perspective, the position of the expatriate is doubly liberating if he considers the operational constraints facile and preserves his prerogative of reinventing, recasting remolding himself and thus initiate his cycle of freedom.

The poetics and politics of exile raise a set of complex issues: how constraining or liberating is to be an expatriate? Does migration mean a mechanical switching over of allegiances? If not, how does one prioritize? Does assimilation into the adopted culture mean a sacrifice of cultural diversity? How feasible are the establishmentarian 'melting-pots' and 'mosaic' formulations of national cultures? Where does 'culture' develop in a multicultural society - are there spaces between impositions of homogeneity and self-willed isolations of immigrant communities into heterogeneous ghettos? Can there be authentic representations of the cultures of origin and adoption? Whom does the expatriate represent- his own community in the adopted home, the community in the country of origin or can he represent the entire immigrant community? How politically potent are these representations? What are the corresponding obligations and responsibilities towards the countries of adoption and of origin especially when they become conflictual in situations of political crisis?

Michael Ondaatje's poetics addresses the above concerns and issues in multiple ways. From a political perspective his early works The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter and the family memóir Running in the Family are relatively a-political in nature though they have an implicit cultural politics and have not been without political controversies. Ondaatje's political perspective has a visible manifestation in his later works In the Skin of a Lion, The English Patient and Anil's Ghost.

Ondaatje's renditions of the legendary American outlaw William Bonney in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden the unrecorded but popular New Orleans Black jazz musician in Coming Through Slaughter have been received variously. The Collected Works of Billy the Kid was critically acclaimed though it triggered an angry response from a politician, John Diefenbaker, a former prime minister of Canada, found it grossly inappropriate to

confer a Canadian award (the Governor General's Award) to a book written on a non-Canadian subject. He lambasted Ondaatje for his American sympathies by pointing out that even Canadian historical figures were "every bit as colorful as what's-his-name in the coonskin hat" (Jewinski 83). Ondaatje did not have to do too much in his defense, as there were obvious chinks in Diefenbaker's literary and historical knowledge. Diefenbaker's outburst was definitely ill grounded though it is difficult to envisage that he could have been the only one to take such a view of the work.

The most significant aspect of Ondaatje's treatment of these semi-historical figures lies in the cultural perspective. Ondaatje appropriates the cultural others and gives himself a kind of mask and a voice that has no ostensible connections with him. While the act may appear transgressive but it is not. Ondaatje's choice and confident treatment of these figures speaks of his inheritance of colonial and postcolonial inter-cultural influences. They are not strenuous and self-conscious presentations of the cultural other but on the other hand writing about/as Billy the Kid has a natural context in Ondaatje, given his British colonial education and exposure to the American comic books and movie Westerns in his childhood in Ceylon. Again writing about a black Buddy Bolden may raise issues of authentic representation but Ondaatje's treatment reveals a level of comfort. Ondaatje relates to Buddy Bolden on the level of his art and with his own experience of living in England and Canada he is not oblivious of Buddy's cultural context in the 1920s New Orleans.

Ondaatje's turn to Sri Lanka and his family with the memoir Running in the Family received serious critical attention. The book has an important place in the evolvement of Ondaatje's politics. For the first time in his writing career Ondaatje attempted to speak about the country and culture of his origin. The book also represents Ondaatje's shift from individual characters to a group or collective existence. Ondaatje has called the book a gesture to his family, something very personal, but given his milieu and recognition the book was gauzed through multiple perspectives. A majority of Canadian critics were impressed by Ondaatje's creation of the exoticism of Ceylon and the surrealistic life of his forebears. Balliett Whitney in an early review of the book observed:

It is a kind of travel book – eloquent, oblique, witty, full of light and feeling – that keeps spilling over into poetry, into fiction, into slapstick and high-class adventure. But it is only partly about the heat and mountains and jungles of Ceylon. Rather it concentrates on the queer, wild, uncontrollable countries that Lalla and Mervyn turned their lives into. (The New Yorker, 27 December 1982, pp 76-77)

However, everyone was not approbatory. A strong reaction came from the Indian Canadian critic Arun Mukherjee. Mukherjee was put off by, what she saw as, Ondaatje's exoticist maneuvers, strategically organized to gratify the adventure-seeking palates of the western audience. Mukherjee in "The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness" proposes, "Ondaatje's success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada." She finds Ondaatje guilty on two accounts, first "there is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry" and secondly, "If one were looking for a cross-cultural experience, or a yard-stick against which the "Canadian" writing could be measured in order to isolate the factors that make up its Canadianness, one would be equally disappointed." Mukherjee finds Running in the Family equally elliptical. Quoting Raymond Williams' words on Trollope, Mukherjee sees a relevant context in Ondaatje's Running in the Family: "What is seen in a social structure with pastoral trimmings. The agricultural poor are placed easily between the produce and the pleasures. And while this easy relationship holds, there is no moral problem of any consequence to disturb the smooth and recommending construction." Mukherjee emphasizes a similar relationship in Ondaatje's portrayal of Sri Lanka in Running in the Family. She drives home the conclusion, "Ondaatje's unwillingness or inability to place his family in a network of social relationships makes the book a collection of anecdotes which may or may not be funny depending on one's own place in the world" (Journal of Canadian Literature. 20, No. I (Spring 1985): 49-67).

Mukherjee's criticism opens a valid perspective in a critical assessment of the poetics of exile from the standpoint of socio-cultural and political allegiances and authentic cultural representations. However, the problem lies in an easy generalization or the imposition of a homogeneous order on the poetics and the politics of exile. In this context the remarks of Renee Green may prove particularly instructive:

Even then, it's still a struggle for power between various groups within ethnic groups about what's being said and who's saying what, who is representing who? What is a community anyway? What is a black community? What is a Latino community? I have trouble with thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories. (qtd. by Bhabha 3)

The questions Green raise open the dynamics of political empowerment in the context of the marginalized communities. There are operational hierarchies and inherent heterogeneity within the narrowest definitions of communities and cultures. While Green finds it difficult to envisage a community as a monolithic fixed category similarly Third World immigrant community cannot be apprehended as a homogenous entity. The trauma/s of dislocation differ and so too the socio-cultural backgrounds and the positions in the adopted homes. It is only in a broad general sense to have a sense of group solidarity that the community can be seen as a homogenous entity. Otherwise such a view is playing in the hands of the

stereotypical modes of determination. Whereby people as different as Cyril Dabydeen (Caribbean Canadian of Indian origin), Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lankan Burgher), Rohinton Mistry (Indian Parsi) or for that matter Arun Mukherjee herself is a 'Paki' to the white eye. A narrow identification of this group means an annihilation of the subtle diversities that foster the creative impulse and its conversion into a community of exile with its own set of givens and the parameters of trauma, resistance to discrimination, and common poetic/political goals.

The politics in Running in the Family is very subtle and complicated. It precisely brings out the fundamental differences within the narratives of dislocation, the historical backgrounds and sense of belonging. The eccentricities and high class adventure of Ondaatje's forebears puts their community in a precise historical context, in a network of social relationships within the Ceylonese society whereby their alienation is more than visible. Suwanda Sugunasiri in "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie That Fled the Revolution" remarks:

The drunken escapades of the men and women, eating snakes, breaking the necks of chickens, throttling mongrel dogs, running naked in tunnels are not unrepresentative of the Eurasian sub-startum elite…however decadent, colonial or counterdevelopemental it appears from the national point of view. The characters were celebrating their status – with the scantest of respect for anyone other than themselves. Indeed the Eurasian behaviour of Running must be seen as simply the first stage of post-colonial Sri Lankan culture, the later stages of which can be seen in the increasingly consumer-oriented and westernizing contemporary Sri Lanka under capitalism. (Canadian Literature 132 (1992): 60-79)

In fact what Ondaatje does is that he gives quite an accurate picture of the alienation of his community back home. While it is a political statement in itself, it is important to consider how far does Ondaatje subscribe to or identify himself with the position of his community in the pre-independence era of Sri Lanka? What options are available to him as he looks back to grasp the hybridity of his community and his own emotional ties? In the historical context Ondaatje did not have too many options. His community and family did belong to the economic elite of the country, but does that necessarily mean that he should be apologizing for his community and his own belonging to it? How should he be apologizing- as one of the colonizers or the colonized- as he partakes from both? Can such an apology suffice? And what do these historical relations mean anyway in the present, in the Canadian context?

All these questions are important and Ondaatje's Running in the Family holds subtle clues to their answers. Ondaatje's portrayal of his family is neither celebratory nor apologetic but it contextulizes his family and community from a socio-cultural and historical perspective. The tone of excess and casualness of Running in the Family is Ondaatje's effort to recuperate the excesses, irresponsibility of his parents' generation. The travelogue description of Sri Lankan landscape has brought in the charges of exociticism on Ondaatje. However this view demands a closer consideration. Graham Huggan in "Exoticism and Ethnicity in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family" points out the implicit irony in Ondaatje's exoticist description of the Sri Lankan landscape that 'mocks his readers and himself for playing the part of wide-eyed foreigners.' Huggan remarks, "By mediating his experiences of Sri Lanka through an exoticist "discourse of the other", Ondaatje disengages himself from the very culture he claims to be approaching" (Essays on Canadian Writing. No.57 (Winter 1995): 116-27). But Ondaatje's disengagement from the Sri Lankan culture is partial and in his exoticist discourse can be traced the elements of the exoticism that pulled his first ancestor like many other European voyagers to the island. Ondaatje is in a position of complex socio-cultural allegiances- I am the foreigner, I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner- he cannot be anyone but himself.

While Ondaatje partakes from the cultural syncretism of his family he has to reinvent his relationship with Sri Lanka. He cannot take his relationship with the island for granted and therefore has to negotiate his belonging through the historical relations and his own position for being a foreigner for a substantial part of his life. Therefore Ondaatje simultaneously engages and disengages himself from the Sri Lankan culture. Ondaatje carefully juxtaposes the different perspectives and relationships, that of the imperial invaders, his own ancestors, the voices that he did not know existed and the natives whom his ancestors ignored. The perspectives and relationships with their contradictions coalesce and disperse in Running in the Family, and the interstice, the in-between spaces, of contradictions and differences allows Ondaatje, through imaginative appropriation and recreation, situate his own evolving relationship with the island (see Chapter 3).

Ajay Heble underlines Ondaatje's achievement: "Acknowledging both the powers and the limits of its representational activity, the proximity and the distance of Ondaatje's relationship with Sri Lankan culture, Running in the Family presents the dialogic mode as a way of modulating from the condition of cultural displacement into a declaration of the possibilities of solidarity." (" "Rumours of Topography": The Cultural Politics of Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family." Essays on Canadian Writing. No. 53 (Summer 1994): 186-203).

If the politics of Running in the Family requires a little digging, the task gets relatively easier with In the Skin of a Lion and The English Patient. These novels, though not professedly political in nature, have explicit political implications. In both the novels Ondaatje creates multicultural situations and explores the negotiable spaces within and across geo-political

and socio-cultural boundaries (refer to chapters 3 and 4). It is important to notice that a recreation or rewriting of history does not have to be necessarily limited to a communal perspective. Ondaatje recreates the past eras of European and Canadian histories and chooses characters other than his own community. Ondaatje's deliberate transgression into the European past and representing the cause of other immigrant communities or dislocated peoples becomes more ex-centric and potent political empowerment of the poetics and politics of exile. The politics in these novels lies in Ondaatje's effort to create human grounds for negotiation of difference and search for compensatory affilative evolvement of cultural relationships by going beyond filaitive ties.

"The struggle of man against power," says Milan Kundera, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting." To remember, to retrieve, to reenter, to resurface and to reinvent memory is an act of simultaneous annihilation and resurgence of both the individual and collective self, a resistance to the sweeping tyrannies of blinkered history and the power craving body politic, that reduces people to essences, into transparent objects that can be looked through and framed into politically viable categories of racial, religious, regional, and sexual denominations. Memory makes the self-opaque, irreducible to a body or geography, an idea or ideology though it carries bodies, geographies, ideas and ideologies within its complex discursive weavings. The narratives of memory have a crucial significance in the constructs of the self and nation and at the same time they bring to the fore the politics, both covert and overt, in the context of the diasporas.

Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a lion and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children can be studied as interesting examples of the diasporic constructs of the self and the nation that open multiple perspectives in the politics of the diaspora at both the individual and communal levels. The two works have a fundamental difference, a difference of vantage points and positions from which their authors enter into personal and collective memories. While Rushdie gets into the history and the margins of the history of his country of origin, India; Ondaatje gets into the skin of histories of his adopted home Canada and explores memories that are not his own. Both Rushdie and Ondaatje make strong claims, claims that are central to their notions of self and claims that have unmistakable socio-cultural and political implications.

There are several questions that need to be addressed – What does the writing of the self-entail? Can the writing of the self be limited to personal pasts? Where does the private end and public begin? Can the writing of the self be a writing of the nation? Can one claim memories, histories and pasts other than his or her own? What are the socio-cultural and political implications of such claims? How imaginary are the imaginary homelands? What lies between material and the metaphoric homelands? What are the inherent advantages and compromises of the diasporic and at home writers in their mappings of the self and the nation? Can the migrant's fabled 'double-vision' be treated as the vision?

The poetics of Michael Ondaatje and Rushdie hold subtle clues to these questions. Saleem Sinai in Midnight's Children and Patrick Lewis in In the Skin of a Lion take a stride into their personal histories and find themselves drawn into a maze of other histories that insist on digressions, that offer counter narratives and subvert homogenizing. Fredric Jameson offers an important clue in his notion of situational consciousness or national allegory – "the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself" (The Location of Culture 140).

Their dilemma partakes the dilemma of the contemporary novelist expressed by John Berger:

It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the storyline laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities. (Postmodern Geographies 22).

Both Saleem Sinai and Patrick Lewis are tormented with this awareness, the too many storylines traversing their own storylines laterally. Padama, Saleem's Dung Lotus, is constantly irritated and finds herself at the end of her wits and patience as the man would not simply get down to his birth, she tells him grudgingly, "You better get a move on or you die before you get yourself born" (38). And Saleem on his part can only say that, "Things - even people – have a way of leaking into each other, like flavours when you cook. Ilse Lubin's suicide, for example, leaked into old Adam and sat there in a puddle until he saw God. Likewise the past has dripped into me… so we can't ignore it…"(38). Saleem cannot ignore histories, inheritances, peoples, places, love, deceits, treacheries, individual and collective optimisms and guilts that have seeped into him and his writing of the self cannot but preclude all these, he is the master of the perforated sheet (23) that has innumerable fissures, and each fissure has its own story waiting to be told, loosely held together by a rapidly disintegrating fabric of Saleem's failing physical and mental faculties.

While Saleem appears to be confronted with gargantuan task of dealing with too many histories and his accidental locking of destiny with that of the nation, Patrick Lewis, on the other hand is faced with another mammoth task; it is of finding history and a past to belong to and share with. He does not have much of a personal history to hold on to or recount, he comes from one of the hinterlands of Canada and the

'whitelandscape of childhood' does not have much beside the memories of the seasonal presence besides the other the loggers who appeared seasonally like the moths and left, producing in Patrick the desire to unlock the mystery of their being. Patrick lacks the fanfare that preceded Saleem's birth, no RamRam Seth predicted his birth, no newspapers waited his birth, no prime ministers sent him framed letters with the premonitory "we will be watching you closely". Both Saleem and Patrick share a vastely different but similar dilemma, Saleem is overburdened with history and Patrick is tormented by a visible lack of history, his father taught him no mythology to hold on to, he is left to carve his own history and create his own myths. Their collective wish is to find a meaning of their life, their being, to give a purpose to it.

V. S. Naipaul in his book India A Wounded Civilization, quotes a young woman who insists that "In India, I relate only to my family" (117). Naipaul is profoundly irritated by the lady's myopic sense of belonging. Naipaul's restlessness, in this context, is partially shared by Saleem and Patrick, they simply can't relate just to their families, even when they do so they find others lurking around the corner, refusing to leave, demanding an inclusion in their writings of the self. There cannot be a self without its others and no knowledge of the self is complete without the knowledge of the other. Saleem knows it and transforms himself into All India Radio (165); tuning into the minds of people and getting into the thick of events, while he enjoys it as a child, in his adulthood he realizes that he had to do it and it was an act of self-preservation:

"Today, with the hindsight of the lost, spent years, I can say that the spirit of self-aggrandizement which seized me then was a reflex, born of an instinct for self-preservation. If I had not believed myself in control of the flooding multitudes, their massed identities would have annihilated mine…" (175).

Patrick on the other hand is pulled towards the other by the emptiness that surrounds him. He sees the hushed politeness of the immigrant loggers in his landscape and is enticed by their silence, as he is fascinated by the seasonal appearance of the moths:

Perhaps he can haunt these creatures. Perhaps they are not mute at all, it is just a lack of range in his hearing. He knows the robust call from the small bodies of cicadas, but he wants converstion – the language of the damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place.(10)

Patrick's fascination for the others speaks of a desire to know the other, to translate this silent relationship of presence in the same landscape into one which has a language. But knowing the other demands a leaping over the wall of the place and in some ways the barriers of the self.

However, it is not an easy task to transform oneself into a radio or leap over the barriers of identity, family, community. The question arises are Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje engaging themselves in the pure fantasy? If they are not, then what is that enables Saleem to convert himself into a radio and helps Patrick to find that language which makes communication possible between him and the others.

Homi Bhabha speaks of the creeping in of the 'unhomely moment' it's the moment when the world around the self of an individual first contracts and then expands limitlessly:

The unhomely moment creeps upon you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in The Potrait of a Lady, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of incredulous terror. And it is at this point that the world first shrinks and then expands enormously….In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become parts of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (Bhabha 9)

Saleem's moment of the unhomely is his realization of the moment when he was born with the twin nations, Nehru's letter that said his life would be a mirror of the nation and "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention" (122). Patrick comes across this moment in In the Skin of a Lion when living among the others he discovers:

His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night-web – all these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without a drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire – the detritus of the age was realigned. (145)

It is at this level, in their unhomed self, that Saleem and Patrick become the extended metaphors of their countries. Saleem with his immense nose and map-face carries the burden of a three thousand years old Indian civilization, the knowledge of his true parents does not snatch his inheritance simply because he has lived it out, the knowledge reveals to him the limitations of parentage that always remains partial; he goes on to have a succession of fathers only to discover that he is the child of time fathered by history (118). Therefore Saleem's act of writing the self throws together the tumble of public events alongside the private ones, under the persistent tick tock of the clock, Nehru and Jinnah, Amina and Vanita, Mountbatten and Methwold, Ahmed Sinai and Wee Willie Winkie, celebrations and riots, delivery pains and burning trains, cries of the new born baby and the yells of the monster let loose in the streets

and the historical speeches and silence of Adam Aziz come together and refuse to be divorced from each other. And Saleem tells an incredulous Padma "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (109).

Patrick on the other hand, feels an emptiness, "Something hollow, so when alone, when not aligned with another….he could feel the rattle within that suggested the space between him and community. A gap of love" (157). By learning to love the other by sharing their spaces and taking responsibility Patrick becomes a prism, becomes Canada not because of his birth or language but by the way he aligns himself to others, feels an emptiness without them.

Both Rushdie and Ondaatje claim fathers other than their own, communities other than their own, and memories other than their own. They are against forgetting not only the memories of their own but those of the others and by refusing to forget, by inhabiting other's skins and memories they have made their works of fiction more than fiction, political statements, counter historical narratives that do not claim factual accuracy but subvert the strongest of political rhetoric and destabilize the most stable of the histories.

Midnight's Children and In the Skin of a Lion as the narratives of nation raise the issues of truthful representation and accountability. The governing metaphors for Rushdie in Midnight's Children and Ondaatje in In the Skin of a Lion are memory and history. These metaphors govern their narrative strategies as well as their versions of truth. Saleem does not claim authenticity because he is too aware of the corrosions and inventions that occur in the process of remembrance but nevertheless holds on to his faith in Memory's truth:

Morality, judgment, character… it all starts with memory….I told you the truth…Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (211)

Saleem admits the possibility of multiple versions, versions that may not represent the truth but are more potent than any authenticated historical truths that may present individuals and events in a breathtaking linear march but fail to cohere, providing no clues to morality, judgment, character that contain the very essence of being.

Rushdie's narrative exploits memory's fallibility to open the uncompromising seams of history, throwing a deeper light into the character and the lost flavours of history. Midnight's Children and In the Skin of a Lion as narratives of memory and history, self and nation take big leaps of imagination and invention, blending fact with fiction, material with the metaphoric, spiritual with mundane. In doing so, they seriously problematize the space of a nation as a geo-political construct. Saleem Sinai wonders about the birth of India, a myth and a nation:

…a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history…was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of collective will – except in a dream we all dared to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and periodically need the sanctification and renewal that which can only be provided by rituals of blood. (112)

India is as real as it is imaginary. India is a myth and a dream too but the myth and the dream of India was given a concrete shape by an act of collective will and collective wills are not accidental they originate from the deeper recesses of layers of civilization and culture, relationships forged and formed through the lived reality of the complex matrix of time, space and social being.

Their constructions of self-have strong political implications. They expose the official and historical lies, Rushdie exposes the tyrannies of the era of emergency and Ondaatje give voice and life to the immigrants forgotten by the Canadian establishment. Their claims have to be juxtaposed with the claims of politics over history, the undone Saleem has to be put alongside with the claims of Indira Gandhi that no atrocities were committed during the emergency, the vanished photographs of the builders of Toronto have to be put alongside the grand snaps of the planners and the architects of the city. Rushdie's and Ondaatje's fiction does it in multiple ways. Graham Greene attacking a journalist remarked, "A petty reason perhaps why novelists more and more try to keep a distance from journalists is that novelists are trying to write the truth and journalists are trying to write fiction" (217). To this the politicians may be added because in the contemporary world they have become the master weavers of fiction and with all their freedom now have to carry the additional responsibility of telling the truth, exposing the political fictions.

Amnesia is the worst curse that a nation can be infected with. Loss of memory is the loss the self and the self of the nation. Jose Arcadio Buendia in One Hundred Years of Solitude frantically attempts to save the inhabitants of Macondo from the spell of amnesia, that began with insomnia and led to the erasure of childhood memories, "then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past (45). The loss of memory succumbs the people of Macondo 'to the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves' (49) and to the mystifications of Pilar Ternera who started 'reading their past as she had read the future before'

(49). Loss of memory makes the people create imaginary realities and live in them. It reduces them to a vulnerable mass that can be molded at will by mystifications of their past by politicians and fortune-tellers alike.

Ondaatje and Rushdie are against forgetting not only the memories of their own but those of the others and by refusing to forget, by inhabiting others' skins and memories they have made their works of fiction more than fiction, political statements, counter historical narratives that do not claim factual accuracy but subvert the strongest of political rhetoric and destabilize the most stable of the histories. Edward Said voicing the Palestinian cause, brings out the pain of a homeland that survives only in the mind, remarks, "The interesting thing is that there seems to be nothing in the world which sustains the story: unless you go on telling it, it will just drop and disappear" (Imaginary Homelands 178).

The act of not allowing the memory to disappear and keeping it alive by a perpetual telling has kept Palestine alive. So does Rushdie consider the 'feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!' (459). Though the process admits the possibility of distortions but it has the power to preserve the flavours of history and memory 'changed in degree not in kind' (461). While Saleem Sinai's jars of pickled histories and memories wait to be 'unleashed upon the amnesiac nation,' he emphasizes the need of constant revisions, 'The process of revision should be constant and endless; don't think that I'm satisfied with what I've done!' He leaves one jar empty (462).

Nation, even without a slight change in its geographical boundaries, is in a state of perpetual transformation, making and unmaking. It is as imaginary as it is real and it requires consistent sanctification and renewal, which does not always have to be provided by rituals of blood, insofar our imagination transcends the barriers of castes, class, religion and language and drive its life force from the socially produced spaces, lived and shared experiences that bind the self with the other, with our environs our histories and memories. The narratives of history and memory like Midnight's Children and In the Skin of a Lion play a crucial role in this context. They are, in a way, the rituals of sanctification and renewal that the nation requires.

Through their journeys into the private and the collective pasts, digressions and inventions they put the imaginary homelands in a realistic perspective and on firmer grounds. Their assumption of the nation in narration juxtaposes the historical truth with the truth of experience, linearity of events with extensions into the horizontal lived and living spaces across the barriers of temporality. In this process they offer a strong resistance to mystifications, political or otherwise, of collective histories and memories and open the space of a nation in its continual state of revisions and reformulations. Each of these narratives reinvents the nation in its own way and its return to past is firmly grounded in the desire to give meaning to the present. And though memory, at one level, is a mourning, in these narratives it is not a mourning without possibilities.

A bridge goes up in In the Skin of a Lion and a world and its art crumble in The English Patient. Ondaatje's creation of the counter-sites of construction and destruction in the two novels is structurally and thematically metaphoric in nature. There is simultaneous construction and deconstruction. Ondaatje juxtaposes the official makers (the city-planners and architects) and the real makers (the immigrant workers) of the bridge and deconstructs the official history. There are other bridges in the making- in-between the immigrant communities and a possible bridge between the domineering centre and its periphery.

Patrick Lewis in the climactic scene in In the Skin of a Lion turns away from destroying the water-filtration plant. Ondaatje circumvents the fictional possibilities of the destruction of the water-plant by Patrick or Patrick's arrest by the officials that in either case would have been a strong statement of the immigrants' reaction to the Establishmentarian coldness. The novel ends with a dialogue between Commissioner Harris and Patrick. Commissioner Harris is forced to shrug off the official defensive demeanor and to meet the real makers of the country half way on the bridge Patrick seeks to build.

Ondaatje emphasizes on the opening of a dialogic space between the centre and its periphery and the subversiveness of the immigrant communities does not seek destruction but an acknowledgement, respect and space, an intimacy in the country they have come to be. Similarly, in The English Patient, as the world collapses at the hands of its politics, there are regenerative forces that seek to build new bridges of human relationships beyond the constraints of cultures, nation-states and identities. Almásy dies, Hana, Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh return to their countries but the experience of togetherness, the curing of the self by curing the other, has transformed them for ever. They meet in a liminal space and depart but the distances between them are immaterial insofar as they remember that bridges exist and can always be constructed between the farthest of the geographical spaces, between the past and the present, between cultures and the colours of the skins. All it takes is an effort and the belief like Queen Sheba in the sacredness of the bridges.

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